

Be Silent before the Lord God

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Date: 02 August 2020

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[0 : 00] One of our late free church ministers, some of you will know who I'm speaking about when I mention him and his well-known tendency.

He had a well-known tendency in English and in Gaelic to interject his sermons with the words, Are you listening, my friend?

It wasn't just a nervous break in the midst of his sermon. It was genuine. It was sincere. He had that true desire for the congregation to listen to what was being said, what was being proclaimed from God's word.

And he had no hesitation in interrupting his sermon with these words, Are you listening, my friend? Well, I remember one day I was in the teens and I listened to the minister.

I was there in one of the services and I remember it was a morning service. I was tired. I have to confess that my mind wasn't fully on what he was saying.

[1 : 13] And all of a sudden I heard these words, Are you listening, my friend? And immediately I almost jumped out of my skin. I thought to myself, He's speaking to me.

Yes, of course he was. He was speaking to me as he was speaking to everyone there in that little church in that congregation. His word spoke to me that it was my responsibility to listen to God's word, to listen to the voice of God, to listen as the word of God was being proclaimed.

And although that was 40 years ago now, more than 40 years ago, I still remember that impact that it had in me, the importance of listening, the importance of being silent before God and listening to his word, listening with that active listening, to hear what God the Lord has to say to me and to all to whom his word is proclaimed.

Of course, there are many times, many times in our lives when we do have to shut our mouths, open our ears and listen.

Listen to God's word. Listen to what the voice of truth declares when we hear God speak to us through his word, when he tells us how we are to live before him.

[2 : 41] What it means to live in a way that honors and glorifies God. And that's chief aim, man's chief purpose is to glorify God and enjoy him forever. And we know and we're told how we're to do that in his word and therefore to listen.

Be silent. Be silent before God. And we're not just simply, of course, to listen. But of course, we're to shut out all these distractions that can so easily come into our minds, come into our hearts when God's word is being proclaimed, when we're reading his word, when we're hearing his word.

And we're to shut out all these distractions when we hear God's infallible word speaking to us. And so this call that we see here before us to be silent before the Lord God, it's that call to hear.

It's that call to listen. It's that call to meditate and that call to obey. Hear, listen, meditate, obey.

Jesus himself emphasized that repeatedly, particularly when he was teaching, when he was teaching the parables, when he was telling, when he was teaching those who are listening to him.

Remember, that's what we saw in Mark chapter four, for example. When Jesus finished the parable, the parable of the sower, remember what he said. He said, he who has ears to hear, let him hear.

[4 : 10] But that saying, it calls each one of us to be aware of what we're hearing now and indeed what we've heard in the past when we've heard God's word proclaimed.

Because what we continue to hear from God's word, it's not just mere words. It's not just sound bites. It's not something just to impress the masses.

But the word of God has power. The word that we hear, the word that reaches to the very core of our beings, to our very hearts. The word of God that changes lives, that transforms lives.

And therefore, when God's word is spoken, when we hear what we hear from the very mouth of God, we are to be silent. And let his voice penetrate our hearts.

We live in a world that's bombarded with media comment. We might see billions of messages, trillions of words each day, keyboard warriors who are all too quick to voice an opinion on everything under the sun.

[5 : 21] We have screens awash with communication after communication, containing thoughts and comments and opinions and words and comments.

But there's only one source of wisdom. There's only one source of wisdom. Only one source of true wisdom that will truly turn you from darkness to light. One source of truth that we do need to hear and hear repeatedly and continuously.

It's the word of God. It's that word that you hear it when we hear it. We stop and we listen and we pay attention. That we're silent before God and we take in what God is telling us for our eternal good.

And it's that being silent. That being silent before God that really should focus your self-discipline, your discipline in waiting on the Lord.

You know, there's so many things that preoccupy our minds. So many things that really come into our minds that conflict. Conflicting voices, impacting our senses.

[6 : 28] But, you know, so often the one thing needful has to be considered. One thing needful to be at the feet of the Lord Jesus. To be silent. To be silent before God.

To allow his voice. Be the one voice that we hear and listen to and apply in your life as a believer of the Lord Jesus.

And so this evening, in this evening service, we're going to turn to God's word. And let him speak to you through that word. Fill your mind with his word.

Allow your heart to absorb the word that you hear. And yes, be still before God as you wait on God. And yes, after having listened to what God has sent you through his word.

We'll respond. Respond in praise. Respond in thanksgiving. And yes, respond in obedience to his word. And there'll be that opportunity also to respond in confession of sin.

[7 : 32] Yes, the sin of not being silent before God. And so to help us in this, in exercising this godly practice of being silent before God.

We're going to turn to the passage that we read here in Zephaniah chapter 1. This is a passage from what we call one of the minor prophets.

Now, it's not minor in the sense of having less significance than the other prophets. Not at all. It's one of the minor prophets, the prophets and printed books at the end of the Old Testament that are minor in the sense that they're smaller.

They're smaller than, say, what we call the major prophets like Isaiah and Jeremiah and Ezekiel. So in this minor prophet, this smaller book of the Old Testament, it's not minor in its insignificance. Not at all. It's utterly significant. This is the word of God. The Calvin's successor, John Calvin's successor was a man called Martin Buser. And Buser wrote this of Zephaniah.

[8 : 34] He said these words, if anyone wishes all the secret oracles of the prophets to be given in a brief compendium, let him read through this brief Zephaniah.

Now, we're not going to read through, of course, this is not going to read through this brief compendium. You can do that in your own time at home. But we're certainly going to consider what we read in this, in the first chapter.

We can go into the beginning of the second chapter. And so we're going to have to consider, first of all, the context in which Zephaniah gave these words.

This spokesperson of God, this prophet of God, given God's word to give to the people. We need to understand the context in which these words were given. We don't need to go into any depth, but certainly we do need to understand, as we said, the background to these words given.

Of course, the background to these words, the context of these words is the context of judgment. The people of Judah at this time, the people of the southern kingdom, had already seen their neighbors to the north, conquered by the Assyrian army, the Assyrian peoples, and sent into exile into Assyria to the north.

[9 : 57] The people of Judah, the people of Judah, the people of Judah, to whom Zephaniah is speaking to. These people have already seen and realized that God's judgment had come upon their northern neighbors.

But at this point, at this point, the people of Judah are still independent, if you like. They haven't yet been conquered. And it seems, even at this time, that a revival has taken place in Judah.

We read at the start of the chapter that Zephaniah is preaching and prophesying during the time of King Josiah. And Josiah was a king who brought about revival of religion in Judah.

And it seems, anyway, that true worship was being re-established in Judah and in its capital, Jerusalem. Despite these reforms, not everyone in Judah has been changed.

At the same time, around about the same time that Zephaniah was prophesying, other prophets were in Judah as well. Men such as Jeremiah, Nahum, and Habakkuk.

[11:06] But no matter how many times these prophets called on the people to fully repent, to fully return to God, no matter how often these prophets preach repentance, there are still the many in Judah who refuse to turn from their evil ways and return to God.

And because of that persistent refusal to mend their ways, because of their refusal to leave the many compromises in their worship, because of their refusal to turn from their so many deviant practices, God is pronouncing judgment on the people of Judah.

And he's going to pronounce that judgment through his spokespeople, his prophets. As we read here in this minor, this lesser in terms of amount of words uttered, but certainly this important prophet Zephaniah.

And what we're reading here of events that happened over two and a half thousand years ago, these words still have relevance, of course, for us today.

You see, the words of scripture, whether it's from a minor prophet, a major prophet, the Old Testament, the New Testament, what we read in God's word is God's word, is God's breathed out word.

[12:32] This isn't merely a history book recording events happening several thousand years ago. What we read in God's word is that breathed out word of God, and therefore it's for you and for me to pay attention to.

I mean, the same God who pronounced judgment on an errant people is the same God who calls you and calls me to listen to his word, to hear his word, to listen to it, to take stock of what we hear, to take stock of our lives in response to God's word.

Yes, to listen and listen carefully, listen intently to what God is saying to us through that word. And particularly even at this time, through these times of continued crisis that we're living through, to listen to what God is saying to us through these times.

Because if we believe that God is sovereign, if we believe that God, yes, God speaks to us through events, through events that are happening even now in our world and in our own country, then surely we have to listen to what God is saying to us through these events and to heed his word and to return to it with all our heart.

And even as we're being instructed even through these times to know what truly is right, what truly is important, what truly is necessary, what truly satisfies, to listen to what God is saying to us even in these times.

[14:07] Just as the Apostle Paul, when he wrote to the church in Colossae, when he wrote Colossians 3.2, set your minds in things that are above, not in things that are on earth.

Because God hasn't allowed this pandemic to happen without good reason. And surely, amongst many reasons, is this call to the church to listen.

This is church to turn back to him with all our hearts. We're all enduring much in the way of restriction. In many ways, even as a congregation, as a church, we have to reassess our priorities. Thank you. You hear me?

Yeah, we're still on. Yeah, you're fine, Nigel. Yeah, okay, thanks, thanks. Just sort of broke up for a wee bit again. Yes, God is reminding us through these times.

[15:25] The church is much more than a building. The church is a community. The church is a called out people of God. It's called to serve him. As we were thinking this morning, we are a church that has to assess who we are to be best, a worshipping church.

And again, as we were reminded this morning, who we are best to be a missional church. Of course, that priority to seek first the kingdom of God involves who we are to be that worshipping church and who we're to be that church that seeks first the glory of God and seeks first the kingdom of God through our witness, through testifying to the living Lord Jesus.

And to seek first, as we seek first the kingdom of God, as we set our minds and things above and not on the earth below, than to do that, truly we do need to be silent before God.

And so let's be silent before God. Let's hear him speak to us. Even as we hear the word preached through Zephaniah the prophet, it was the same words that Zephaniah was given to proclaim or the same words that we're hearing today, the same words that we're to listen to, meditate upon and obey.

Let's think first of all, on that command to be silent. Be silent. This is a command. This is a command given by God through his prophet.

[16:56] It's not a take it or leave it option. And because it's a command, it's a necessity to obey. There's that urgency to obey the word that God gives to us by way of command.

And God doesn't give us commands just to disrespect or ignore. God doesn't give commands for no particular reason. God gives commands because there's a deep purpose behind these commands and therefore commands given to obey.

Now, of course, there are many commands that we're hearing, even in our present day, when we hear of the, in relation to the current restrictions. We have a command that's, that's founded in law. We have the wording from our government website. People must, by law, wear a face mask in shops and in public transport. And that's not a suggestion. That's not an option. It's not a take it or leave it option.

That's a command that's a law given for your physical well-being, for the good of your health and the health of others. And how much more when we see God's commands and hear God's commands.

[18:07] They are commands to be obeyed. They're not a take it or leave it word that God gives to us. This is God's command that he gives to obey for the good of your soul.

And yes, for the good of others. But when God gives us that command to be silent, let's obey, let's do as God gives us to do. Of course, when we read of other commands in God's word, again, these are commands to be obeyed.

In our midweek meetings, our recent midweek meetings, we were looking at the Ten Commandments. The commandments, not take it or leave it options. The commandments that God gave to his people and for his people to honor him, to glorify him, to live well, to live as God gives us, command to live for his glory.

Or think of the commands that Jesus gave, when Jesus gave that command to repent, to repent of her sins, for all you who are laboring and heavy laden, and her burden, to come to him.

Command, come to Jesus. And so the command then that we read here in Zephaniah chapter one, be silent. There's no less a command than any other command that God gives to us.

[19:25] This is a command to be heeded. This is a command to be obeyed. This is a command from the mouth of God. A command to be silent before the Lord gone.

Obviously, the people of Judah had not been silent before gone. They'd preferred to hear the sound of their own voices. They'd preferred to hear what they were saying within themselves rather than hearing the voice of God.

The people of Judah, so many in Judah, had preferred to be distracted by the other gods whom they were worshipping at the same time as they were trying to worship God, worshipping other gods.

We saw that in the passage. They were worshipping this false god, Milcom, the god of the Ammonites, trying to worship God one minute, worshipping God, worshipping this false god the next.

But you see, their ears had been listening to what was false. Their ears had been, not been paying attention to what the prophets had been repeatedly telling them.

[20:36] Worship God alone. Worship no other god but God. They hadn't been silent before God. They hadn't listened to the voice of God speaking to them.

You might say that they'd been counter-cultural. They refused to heed the word of God. They'd refused to be silent before God.

They were preferring to heed the voices of compromise. the false promise to have a foot in both camps. And you know, in our own day and age, you know, even the very art of being silent, that's something that's so counter-cultural to our times.

And how much more than silent, being silent before God, that's, we might say, so off the scale in terms of the necessity to wait in the Lord.

You hear his voice, direct your heart and your mind to honouring him, to glorifying him. You know, that failure to be silent before God, that failure truly is at the root of sin.

[21 : 46] Go back to the Garden of Eden. Remember our first parents, Adam and Eve, instead of listening to God with that view to obeying every word that God gave them, Adam and Eve instead listened to that voice, the counter-voice of the serpent who told them a lie.

A lie, of course, that's had universal consequences for the whole of mankind. The first human sinned by not listening, by not being silent before God, by not listening to the voice of God and instead listening to the voice of Satan.

They needed to be silent before God and they failed to do that. And of course, the consequences of their failure and coming of sin into the world. But of course, we can learn from these errors, the errors of our first parents, the errors of those in Judah whom Zephaniah was challenging to listen to the word of God.

That not listening when the people ought to have listened, that not listening that brought judgment, God's judgment upon the people. But now, the people must listen.

Zephaniah has been given again the word of God, the people must listen. They must listen to what God's going to say to them concerning his punishment towards them. And for your sake, for my sake, for all our sakes, listen, the word that God directs you so that you might and so that you will obey what God's demanding of you for your service.

[23 : 22] it should go without saying but we really do have to repeat this. Only when you're silent before God will you actually hear his voice.

And only when you hear his voice will you know what to obey. Of course, there's a time to speak but there's also a time to be silent this week that we read in Ecclesiastes 3.

And that time to be silent surely is now. Now this time that God is giving us to be silent before him and to obey what he's speaking to us through his word.

How we should live. How we should glorify him even in these present circumstances in which we're living. You know, we live not just in a world that says of good that it's evil and of evil that it's good. You know, even in the church of God. There are so many contrary voices expressing so many different aspects of the way in which we're to serve God. And it grieves my heart as it must grieve your heart, the heart of every Christian to see and to hear what we're seeing and hearing and so much of the wider church and the voice of man-centered reason, humanist reason is being listened to rather than the voice of God through his word being listened to.

[24 : 47] Because God in his word clearly sets out how we are to obey him, how we are to live before him. And yet the voice of evil, the voice of lies has been listened to and it grieves the heart of the Christian when we see society's morals going the way that they're going.

when the exclusive claims of the Lord Jesus as the one true Savior is ignored. When the foundations of our faith are being challenged and even disrespected by those who speak in the name of Jesus who have no saving faith in them.

But you know, let's not simply look to others. Look to yourself. None of us can be complacent. If whenever we turn away from listening to the voice of God, whenever that happens, you're going to listen to another voice.

And so many have wandered from the path of truth when other voices are being listened to. These counter-Christian voices that have no desire for the honour and glory of God.

These counter-Christian voices that excuse license for liberty, which excuse sin as being of no importance. As we listen, we are to be silent before the Lord our God.

[26 : 19] It's that command, a command to be obeyed. But notice there's a connected reason for the command as we read on in verse seven. Be silent before the Lord God for the day of the Lord is near.

See, that call to be silent before the Lord God. It's a call to be reverent. It's a call to wait on the Lord. There's an explanation given for that command to be silent.

There's an urgency. There's an urgency to listen to what God's about to say because the day of the Lord is near. what are we seeing here?

Well, these words that tell of the day of the Lord, these words, this is not the first time that these words were given. These words that were given beforehand through other prophets, these words

spoke of judgment.

Isaiah, for example, spoke of the coming of the day of the Lord. He spoke of that in terms of what God would do to intervene in the lives of his people in order for God to reveal his majesty, to reveal his power, to reveal his character and particularly in relation to God punishing his unfaithful people. [27 : 42] And now it's through the prophet Zephaniah. Again, the people of Judah, again the people are hearing these words uttered, the hearing of the day of the Lord to come.

In other words, God's patience with his people coming to an end. The day of the Lord's judgments close to hand. There's going to be vengeance, going to be righteous vengeance, vengeance when, as we see in the remainder of verse seven, we read that the Lord has prepared a sacrifice and consecrated his guests.

Now these are in many ways unusual words, but these are words with meaning, words with purpose. These are in many ways chilling words, words, these are words that tell us that God has set apart a people.

He's called them guests. In other words, those who carry out his will, those who are going to carry out God's will in punishing his people. God is going to send these people from other nations to act as God's servants to punish his unfaithful people.

and the very fact that God speaks here through Zephaniah speaks of sacrifice, telling that blood's going to be shed and shed through these invading people.

[29 : 03] In other words, there's going to be war, a coming of war, a time of war. God's going to send people from other nations to carry out his purposes and because it's God who's speaking, God foretelling what's about to happen, then his word is true, it will be fulfilled.

It did happen. It did happen. Judah was conquered, the people of Judah sent into Babylon. And so the people are hearing God speak to them.

Judgment is going to come, the day is coming, and that judgment's got to be acknowledged. And being acknowledged, that judgment acknowledged, God gives the people, even at this time, time to repent.

If we'd read on in Zephaniah, we'd have read in chapter 2 of Zephaniah giving the people hope.

Listen to the words here. Yes, this invading force is going to come.

It's going to come from another nation. God's judgment is going to happen. But there's still hope for those who truly repent. Zephaniah 2 verse 3, seek the Lord, all you humble of the land, who do as just commands.

[30 : 24] Seek righteousness, seek humility. Perhaps you may be hidden on the day of the anger of the Lord. And that word of hope is a word that remains.

There is a day, a day coming, the day of the Lord, that the Lord Jesus tells us of, his disciple, the day that the Lord will return.

It is the day of the Lord. And that day when the Lord returns, will be the day when the Lord returns, Lord Jesus returns as judge, judge of all the earth.

Even now as we're hearing these words proclaimed, we have that word promise that Jesus gave when he said, behold, I'm coming soon. These are the words of truth from the one who is the truth. No deceit in these words of Jesus. Jesus is coming, coming soon, and of course his coming is nearer than when Jesus first uttered these words.

[31 : 31] So the question has to be answered, answered by you and answered by me. Are you ready for the return of Jesus? Have you been silent and listened to the voice of Jesus speak to you, telling you of the imminence of his return and of that return in judgment when Jesus comes to judge the living and the dead?

When those who've given their lives to him by faith, well, they'll know eternal life. Well, they'll know that life in the new heavens and the new earth, the promise that Jesus gives to all who've truly repented of their sins and turned to the Savior in faith.

But the word of Jesus also has to be heeded for those who haven't given their lives to him, who haven't repented of their sins, who haven't acknowledged him as Lord, as Savior, as that promise of eternal destruction for all who've not bowed the knee to the Savior in life.

And just as God gave hope two and a thousand years ago to those in Judah who truly would repent and who would be hidden from the anger of the Lord when the invading army of Babylon came.

So there's still that word of hope given to all who truly will repent, who truly will come before God and feel repentance of sin. And so we're given that promise of salvation for all who truly do listen

and respond to the word of God and to hear again the word that Jesus says, he who has ears to hear, let him hear.

[33 : 12] Well, you've heard the word of God proclaimed. You've heard it not just this evening but over many evenings, many months, many years, even many decades. You truly listen.

You truly have been silent before the Lord, your God. You truly listen to what God has said to you of what truly matters to listen to him.

Remember when Jesus was at the home of Martha and Mary. Martha was so distracted by all the various jobs that had to be done around the house when Jesus was there.

But Mary, Mary sat at the feet of Jesus, listening to Jesus teaching her. Martha was distracted.

Mary listened. And as Jesus said to Martha, that one thing needful that Mary has undertaken.

And truly that's the word that God gives us this evening. To sit at the feet of Jesus, to listen to him.

There's that one thing needful, to be silent before the Lord or God, to heed his word and to know his blessing, the blessing that he gives to all who truly do listen, who truly do obey, who truly do meditate upon his word.

[34 : 31] And we're not simply hear us only, but do us also. Well, may God bless us with that word, his true word, his word of grace, his word of promise, as we seek to abide by that word and live in his presence, as we seek to honour him in all our ways.

Amen. Let us pray. Our heavenly father, we truly do confess our sin before you when we have failed to listen to you as we ought, when we fail to be silent before you and prefer to hear the voices of others who have no desire of honouring you.

Teach us, Lord, to be strong in that act of listening to you, of being silent before you and in waiting upon you. And Lord, as we are silent before you, that we will endeavour the more to honour you, to live for you, to glorify you.

Bless, Lord, we pray all that has been said this evening. Forgive all that has been said on us, but Lord, be with your people, be with us as we continue to worship you now.

We pray these things in Jesus' name. Amen. Amen. Well, we're led to found a city safe and strong which they inhabited.

[36 : 27] Psalm 107, 33 to 43, God's words. He changed the streets to wilderness where streams to desert and and fruitful land to higher ways for sins of trellis there.

He changed for children to rolling streets, the hungry there he led to found the city still and strong which do not did but water should enjoy his land.

May set joy to gekommen and Bye for our They face behind their fortunes well, they suffered great distress.

Brought home by him, who soars the proud, they roamed the wilderness. But he did not abandon where he brought the needy foe.

From their inflation and in Greece their families like a fall.

[38 : 41] The upright sea is standard, the wicked hold their peace.

Let all the wise take gold and wear the laws of God not cease.

In closing in prayer in the benediction, may the grace of the Lord Jesus and the love of God the Father and the fellowship of the Holy Spirit be with you all, both now and forevermore.

Amen. ■■■IZ